

## **The Communicational Aspects of the Building Process**

### **– A Necessary Expansion of the Scope**



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#### **Abstract**

Co-operation, coordination, and clear communication are aspects of the building process related to human interaction, which are now gaining priority within the field. The growing interest in the human interaction aspect of the building process can be seen as a sign of recognition of the need for adjusting to the change in the marked conditions. On these grounds a study of the communicational aspects of the building process in the form of a preliminary study of the organizational structure where the client chooses to include an external consultant in the building process to function as the client's representative - a structural choice departing from the tradition and now becoming a trend in Denmark. The objective was twofold: firstly, to reach a better understanding of the reasons for and implications of this - now common but sparsely studied - structural choice and specifically the role of the client consultant, and to examine whether there is basis for a further study of this role and its conditions, and secondly, to explore the potential in doing such a study through a communication theoretical approach and method. The study was based on a selected case study of a building project, which is now under construction, with completion due in the autumn of 2007. The study points to a potential lying in applying a broad conception of the communicational dimension of the building process as to include communication at a strategic level when organizing and managing the building projects.

#### **Expanding the scope - introduction**

Judged from the focus of current initiatives to improve the building process what seemed hitherto to be a widely accepted assumption that it is within the sphere of these processes' technical characteristics that lie the biggest challenges for the building industry in the future, seems finally being challenged. Both researchers and practitioners within the field have tried to draw attention to issues regarding organization and management, not only as central elements of the building process but as areas where challenges facing the industry can be identified and action should be taken. Co-operation, coordination, and clear communication are elements mentioned as crucial for the functioning of the building process - e.g. by Emmitt [1999], Saunders [1996], Fisher [2000], Werborg [2001]. These aspects of the building process related to human interaction now gain priority partly as a result of the success obtained by experimenting with the methodical principles of partnering and lean construction [Erhvervs- & Byggestyrelsen 2002, Bertelsen & Høgsted 2003, Andersen 2004, Christensen 2006, Jensen 2001].

The growing interest in the human interaction aspect of the building process can be seen as a sign of recognition of the need for adjusting to the change in the marked conditions. As in other fields marked by the intensified globalization it continuously becomes harder to operate in the building industry, or put in another way, the growing competition demands of the building professionals to change, to renew their perceptions and adjust their conduct [e.g. Fisher 2000, Ockman 2000, Saunders 1996]. Recognizing the heterogeneous and complex character of the building process can be seen as an initial step in this indispensable adjustment process. On these grounds a study of the communicational aspects of the building process becomes highly relevant. Not only can it unfold a hitherto neglected dimension of the building process and thereby provide knowledge of great importance in regard to developing the methods, which can account for the changed conditions. This is needed since the widening of the scope on the building process, which the recognition of its multidimensional character represents, demands a corresponding match in the methodical approach. This means an approach, which can assure that the multidimensional character of the building, is accounted for in the way the process is handled.

Also a communicational study can show that the communication represents a complex dimension in itself since communication is both a part of the object to be improved by the various initiatives – the building process – and a part of the way of the very improvement process since handling the transition - changing habits and view and engaging in experiments with new methods - demands of the people involved to communicate. This duality represents a challenge in itself adding to the multitude of conditions which one needs to bear in mind and consider when working improving the building process. In this way introducing new methods for structuring and managing building projects when given the prospect of better solutions concurrently unfold the building process, exposing seemingly new layers and thereby making the extension of the complexity of the process only more evident. This is why studies of the communication aspects of the building process are needed.

### **The role of the client consultant from a communication perspective – a preliminary case study**

Within this contextual framework it becomes interesting to take a closer look at the organizational structure where the client chooses to include an external consultant in the building process to function as the client's representative - a structural choice departing from the tradition and now becoming a trend in Denmark. Regarded from a communication perspective the client consultant can be seen as representing a bottleneck in regard to handling the flow of information between the client and the other parties involved which in itself can affect the course of the process. The inclusion of such a role in the project organization also changes the the participants' organizational frame of reference which might have a detectable destabilizing effect on the process. A study of this specific way of structuring a building process is interesting not only because it will provide general knowledge of this hitherto only sparsely studied organizational structure. By focusing on the communication aspects of this organizational structure a neglected dimension of the building process will be rendered visible. At the same time, light will be cast on the role of the client representative and the conditions for its exercise – a role which has emerged from clients immediate need of a representative and is still in the process of consolidation into the existing practice.

The structural choice which includes a client consultant as representative in the organization is intriguing seen from a communication approach since it implies adding to the already considerable amount of managerial challenges by increasing the complexity of the organization as well as the communication structure [Walker 1998, Wilkinson 2001]. Thereby it enhances the risk of hampering the flow of the process. Including a client consultant in the organizational structure and placing it – as is often the case – in a mediating position between the client and the rest of the process participants can be seen as an indication of the client's wish to simplify the relation to the rest of the project organization. The client consultant can function as the single channel of communication giving the client advantages in regard to control of the information flow, getting the sufficient degree of professional assistance and advise, making it possible for the client to decide the degree of his/hers involvement in the everyday procedures of the building process. At the same time bringing the client consultant into the organization adds to its complexity and adds a link to the chain of communication. These reflexions have been the outset for this preliminary study.

In the autumn of 2005 a project was initiated in order to investigate the potential in doing a further study of the communication aspects of the building process when organized as above-mentioned. The objective was twofold: firstly, to reach a better understanding of the reasons for and implications of this – now common but sparsely studied – structural choice and specifically the role of the client consultant, and to examine whether there is basis for a further study of this role and its conditions, and secondly, to explore the potential in doing such a study through a communication theoretical approach and method. This has been done on the basis of a selected case study consisting of qualitative interviews with key individuals from the central parties in a building project, which is now under construction, with completion due in the autumn of 2007. Their statements have been treated employing a communication theoretical method.

### **The building process from a communication perspective – theory and method**

The theoretic and methodical framework of the study is based on the French professor in communicational studies Alex Mucchielli's formulation of a systemic communication theory which he names *La théorie systémique des communication* and its derived method. It represents a communication approach consisting in examining the communication aspects of the process as a dynamic systemic structure. Applied to the context of the building process this implies defining the building process as a dynamic communication system constituted and maintained by the interaction of its participants [Mucchielli 2000, Mucchielli 2005]. The basis for defining it as a system comes of the following hypothesis: the actors are interrelated through their communication interchanges, which in turn are interconnected through a circular feed-back systematic. This means that an exchange always implies a response reaction, which in turn implies a response and so forth, leading to what Mucchielli calls an action-reaction dynamics. Due to a certain degree of routine in the behaviour of the actors their interchanges take on a typical character that makes it possible to detect a pattern. This tendency towards typification equally becomes a characteristic of the structure in which the actors' interrelations can be inscribed, giving the structure a certain degree of stability, which justifies defining it as a system.

Analyzing the building process in this theoretical context involves ascribing a certain degree of predictability and typification to its structure and functioning. This means that the participants – when stepping into a new building process - have a notion of what to expect in regard to both the organizational conditions that define their liberty of action and the actions of the other parties. These expectations have many sources including a conception of the function and position of each participant in the process. So what happens when the organizational structure of the process is changed by the introduction of a new or different role such as the client consultant? How do the participants handle the situation? Do the participants accord their perception of the roles and positions, their expectations and actions with the new organizational change? Or will they still – to some extent – act in reference to their former expectations though the foundation for these have changed? These are some of the questions, which have worked as leading threads in the current investigation of the functioning of the building process.

### **Summery of the results from the preliminary study**

In the selected case the participants defined the role of the client consultant as the one keeping track of budget and costs during the process, seeing to it that things run on schedule, surveying that the other participants live up to their responsibilities as these are formulated in their separate contracts with the client. The goal of this being to assure the client gets the 'best possible building within the given budget delivered on time'. In order to do this the client consultant needs to keep track of the flow of the process as a whole. This implies being well informed which in turn demands staying in continuously contact with the rest of the project organization. Apparently the flow of information had been successfully suited and systemized by specific and detailed procedures so as to make the flow of communication as simple as possible all while providing the participants with the information they need, when they need it. This could be the possible reason that the participants did not experience it as problematic that another link had been added to the 'line of command' though it implied an increase in the distance between the client and the rest of the project organization. The communication aspect concerning the direct facilitation of information is not seen to represent any noteworthy challenge, as it does not affect the level of

performance. So this aspect of the client consultant's role did not – in this instance of practice – represent the challenge, which in a communication theoretical perspective had seemed to be the case. This must be seen in relation to the specific conditions for the process leading to an untraditional division of responsibility between client, user and client consultant.

As expert on the functionality of the building the user has been authorized to play a primary part in the decision-making regarding the design on behalf of the client. This means that in the given building project the client consultant has in fact not been the client's single link to the project organization and vice versa. Or at least, seen from a communicational perspective the client consultant has shared the role as the client's representative with the user who has in some way also represented the client by means of assigned authority. However, in practice the user does not participate in the process on the same practical day-to-day level as the client consultant and so, in relation to the rest of the project organization the client consultant still is still both regarded as and functioning as the rest of the organization's main contact to the client. The high degree of user involvement does, however, pose a challenge to the client consultant since it demands of him to work in close collaboration with the user all while staying alert towards the users dispositions to ensure that these do not favour the users interests at the expense of the that of the client. This means that the client consultant – view not only from a communicational perspective – in fact rests the primary representative of the client in the sense that the client consultant's primary objective is to ensure the client's interests – satisfactory quality within the given time and budget.

Under the given conditions one could suspect the possible overlap between the responsibility field of the client consultant and that of the user give rise to conflict. However, this has not been the case probably due to the high degree of commitment and cooperativeness shown by the parties involved. In practice the collaboration between the client consultant and the user is marked by informal manners – as goes for the project organization as a whole – and a high degree of trust. This is interesting in relation to the points stated by J. R. Turner and R. Müller [2004] about the principal-agent relation between project owner and project manager. They find that medium level of structure and high degree of collaboration between project owner and project manager are key factors for obtaining the best project performance. The relation between the client, the user and the client consultant in the given project could be considered an example of such a combination. They define collaboration as 'combining clearness of objectives and relation norms' which they consider 'reflects the clarity of the end deliverables and the nature of the working relationship' [Turner & Müller 2004]. This is interesting in regard to the relation between the client consultant and the manager of the projection of the design in the given case. The study showed incoherence between their understanding of each other's role and the boundary between the two. Constituting a grey area between them a responsibility void emerged which in after some time started to affect the other participants directly and the progress of the process indirectly. The analysis indicated that a clarification of the roles and the responsibilities assigned to each participant earlier on in the process could have ensured a mutual understanding between the two, removing the cause for the conflict and thereby preventing it. This is not only interesting in regard to solving or avoiding specific conflicts between to parties in the building process. Within the framework of this study the question becomes relevant in the examination of the role and position of the client consultant in conjunction with a critical discussion of how the communicational aspects of the process are handled.

The conflict springing from the apparent incoherence of each participant's perception of each other's roles gives rise to two questions. The first concerns the incoherence itself the essence being the question of empowerment in relation to financial authority. It lies beyond the scope of this paper to elaborate this issue, however, it is relevant to point to as an essential part of any further study – not only because it plays an important part in the relation between the client consultant and the client cf. Turner & Müller [2004]. It must also be considered as relevant in relation to a general discussion of the roles and functioning of the building process. The second question springing from the analysis of the conflictous situation concerns how communication is viewed and accordingly handled as a dimension of the building process. In the case studied communication is primarily viewed on a very concrete level as specific tasks having to do with the flow of information. The responsibility for communicating – understood as handling information - is assigned each participant as a part of his or her role. In opposition to this I

propose – on the basis of this study – to apply a broader conception of communication in relation to the building process. This should consist in including a more abstract understanding of communication, not only as exchange of information but as human interaction being a much wider concept. By adding a structural approach to the expansion conception of communication room would be created for a more strategic use of communication and thereby exploiting the neglected potential in the conditions for the process. An objective of such strategic work could be to create optimal conditions for collaboration and good communication during the process. The study pointed to clarification of the roles and accordance of the participants' expectations to individual and collective performance as a means to improve conditions for collaboration. In relation to a further study of the role of the client consultant as the client's representative it would be relevant to examine the role in the context of the expanded scope as suggested above – where the building process as a whole and the communicational dimension in itself are view as complex structures. Given the role of the client consultant – bearing in mind that it is role still in the process of consolidation - consists in ensuring interests of the client ensuring the conditions for good communication approach on a strategic structural level could be seen as a natural part of the client consultant's role in the future.

Also consisting in testing a communication theoretical method the study proved fruitful in the sense that Mucchielli's systemic communication method resulted in an unfolding of the relations of the participants in the selected building project. On the basis of the findings of this preliminary study there seem to be potential in exploring theories of communication in relation to studies of the functioning of the building process and the roles involved. However, being a preliminary study it did not give sufficient basis for evaluating the specific theory and method used in opposition to others.

### **Topics for further study**

As illustrated above this preliminary study pointed to a potential in expanding the scope of the building process by exploring it's communicational dimension. Thereby the study touched upon a range of topics bearing potential for further study. Some of the central topics being the following:

- Including communication on a strategic level in structuring and managing building projects: This could consist in exploring the potential and the possible ways of implementation e.g. by a detailed study of the conditions for the interaction between the participants in the process.
- The role of the client consultant: This could be in form of a more detailed study of the communicational dimension either by considering it in the context of a broader conception of communication integrated at a strategic level in the management of the building process, or by studying the process of consolidation of the role itself by means of a communicational approach
- Communicational theory and method: Consisting in experimenting with applying different communicational theories and methods in the context of the building process

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